

2000

The Cost of Playing Outside: The Unadvertised Impacts of the SUV

Sarah Baird

Denison University

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.denison.edu/articulate>



Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Baird, Sarah (2000) "The Cost of Playing Outside: The Unadvertised Impacts of the SUV," *Articulâte*: Vol. 5 , Article 3.

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.denison.edu/articulate/vol5/iss1/3>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Denison Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Articulâte by an authorized editor of Denison Digital Commons.

THE COST OF PLAYING OUTSIDE: THE UNADVERTISED IMPACTS OF THE SUV

BY SARAH BAIRD '00

A current advertisement for the 1997 Infiniti QX4 sport utility vehicle (SUV) proclaims: "Careful, you may run out of planet." The advertisers most likely meant to suggest that the car is capable of taking the driver anywhere he or she wants to go, though the warning implies that number of locations could be exhausted. Increasing numbers of drivers have embraced the idea of owning a vehicle capable of traversing both city streets and backcountry roads. The environmental movement aided in popularizing the outdoors, drawing many people out of the city and into national parks and wilderness areas. However, when we begin to examine the actual environmental impacts of driving an SUV, it becomes apparent that there is more being lost than just driving terrain. The growing popularity of SUVs has caused serious environmental impacts ranging from increases in pollution rates to widespread climatic changes. Advertisers must now respond to the claims of environmentalists who at one time fueled the sales of SUVs, but now threaten to ruin them. In light of the growing concern over the negative effects of SUVs on the planet, advertisers have begun to appeal to the individual's sense of comfort and security amidst the unpredictable conditions of the natural world. Three current advertisements demonstrate the ambivalence felt by SUV manufacturers towards consumers with environmental concerns.

Though the negative environmental effects of SUVs are known, advertisements continue to portray the vehicles in a natural setting, as though they are somehow part of their surroundings. An ad for the Toyota 4Runner featured in *Sports Illustrated* (January 17, 1999:23) shows the car on a rocky surface with snow capped mountains in the background. The first rays of a rising sun highlight

the vehicle's sleek exterior. Overlaid across the photographed sky above the mountains is the phrase, "Air conditioning doesn't grow on trees." This statement suggests that though the vehicle can take us to a remote location, we will not be asked to relinquish our sense of comfort. Instead, it promises to provide us with amenities that nature cannot create. Toyota wants consumers to believe that nature should be enjoyed from the inside of the 4Runner looking out.

Toyota attempts to appease environmentalists by suggesting that they are also environmentally concerned. The small print at the bottom of the ad says, "Toyota reminds you to 'Tread Lightly!'" This proclaims its support of an organization called "Tread Lightly!" whose mission is to "increase awareness of ways to enjoy the great outdoors while minimizing impacts" (www.treadlightly.org). Toyota is encouraging us to reduce our impact on the earth, though it seems contradictory that the gross vehicle weight of the 4Runner is over 5,000 pounds (www.toyota.com). They are hoping to quell the concerns of environmentalists by associating themselves with an environmental organization. Toyota's weak attempt to align itself with the environmentalists makes the ad incoherent and contradictory.

The advertisers want us to believe that inside the safe world of an SUV environmental problems do not exist. An advertisement in *Backpacker* (September 1999:100) for the Chevrolet Tahoe plays into the notion that SUVs should take us into the wild, but not out of our comfort zone. The ad features the Tahoe cresting a grassy hill in a lush and sun-drenched location. The text describes the vehicle's "OnStar" system and it makes the claim, "Wherever you go, your security blan-

Sarah Baird

ket is packed." The OnStar system means that with the push of a button, help is on the way. The "OnStar advisors" will send someone to the rescue "even when you don't know where you are." The concluding sentence reads, "Because sometimes the call of the wild turns into a call for help." Chevrolet suggests that we are never in danger while behind the wheel of a Tahoe. The OnStar system means the owners will never be lost or find themselves beyond the boundaries of assistance. The Chevy Tahoe allows for exploration without risk.

SUV advertisers suggest that we needn't expose ourselves to the harsh conditions of a cruel environment. An advertisement for the Chevrolet Blazer in *Backpacker* (September 1999) plays on the idea of minimizing risk by offering the consumer a safe way to view the world. The Blazer advertisement contains a black and white photo of a rocky coastline with waves crashing and ominous clouds looming above. The Blazer is perched atop a large, white lighthouse and its headlights are providing a beam of light. The slogan promises: "A little security in an insecure world." We're meant to feel calm and consoled amidst the uncertainty of the pending storm. The contrast between the light and dark images allows the lighthouse and the Blazer to stand out as beacons in the storm. The Blazer's headlights lead us believe in the safety of the SUV in threatening conditions.

By highlighting the features contributing to SUV comfort and security, the advertising industry tries to calm our fears about traversing the wilderness. However, their hidden agenda is to eliminate our anxiety about environmental destruction by showing the SUV as a necessary part of the natural world. The sport utility vehicle saved the American auto industry in the late 1980s when sales were declining due to competition from foreign markets. The growth of the SUV market throughout the 1990s has led sales of the vehicles to comprise 23 percent of total auto sales (Stork as quoted in Goeway 2000:114). As the nation's biggest advertisers, the auto industry has focused on marketing SUVs claiming they are stylish, roomier than cars, more powerful, safer, and

15

capable of going virtually anywhere (Bradsher 1997).

The history behind the SUV gives us some insight into why they are environmentally destructive. Bradsher notes that in the beginning, SUVs were used mostly on farms and construction sites and they were classified as "light trucks." Because most were used for commercial purposes, they received lower standards for emission rates from the EPA resulting in their emission of 75 percent to 175 percent more smog-causing nitrogen oxides than even large cars. Research indicates that the emissions from cars and light trucks comprised nearly one-fifth of the American emissions of global warming gases in 1990. If the popularity of light trucks continues to rise, the emissions from the U.S. could rise by as much as 55 percent. Light trucks are also exempt from gas-guzzler taxes which means that the auto industry is not paying the price for SUVs that they must pay for the production of cars with low fuel economies. The exemptions granted to SUVs based on their prior status as light trucks means that automakers are under no pressure to make SUVs more environmentally friendly (Bradsher 1997). The industry simply chooses to ignore these concerns and continues its efforts to convince even environmentally concerned consumers that SUVs are good.

Despite the peaceful images offered by the advertisers, many environmentally-conscious consumers have started an "anti-SUV" crusade. Individuals and groups opposed to SUVs began to expose the harmful environmental effects of the gas-guzzling giants shortly after they gained popularity in the early 1990s. A magazine published by the Sierra Club featured an article that discussed the poor fuel economy of SUVs. This caused the auto industry to remove most of its ads from the publication, costing the magazine 7% of its annual ad revenue (Bradsher 1997). Despite the fact that Ford has been trying to appease environmentalists by promising to produce cleaner vehicles, the company recently introduced the largest SUV to date on the market, the 3.5-ton, 19-foot Ford Excursion. After

Sarah Baird is from Denver, Colorado and is a senior environmental studies major with a concentration in environmental writing and an English minor.

Articulate • 2000

Articulate • 2000

learning of its 12 mile per gallon fuel efficiency, the Sierra Club called it a "suburban assault vehicle [that] will guzzle enough gas to make Saddam Hussein smile" (Akre 1999).

The advertising industry is addressing these environmental concerns largely by urging us to forget about them. It does not portray the SUVs against polluted backdrops and their impacts on the landscape appear minimal or non-existent. The ads show vehicles that respect nature, though, in reality, SUVs are major contributors to environmental degradation. The ads choose to focus on how safe the owner of an SUV feels. They promise us safety, security and power and play into our notion of "bigger is better." The industry is also capitalizing on the cultural popularity of appearing "outdoorsy." Even though only ten percent of drivers ever leave paved streets and highways, the ads suggest that an SUV can at least allow us to appear rugged (Storck as quoted in Goeway 2000).

After examining the tactics used to market SUVs, we begin to wonder if the advertisers have been successful in sedating environmental concerns by offering them harmonious images of the vehicles in the natural world. An article in *The New York Times* highlighted

the story of 39-year-old single engineer who described himself as environmentally conscious and worked to conserve energy by keeping his heat low during the winter. In 1997, he traded in his 1994 Subaru Wagon for a 1994 Land Rover Discovery, the SUV with one of the lowest fuel efficiency ratings, so that he could make it to the ski slopes during large snowstorms (Bradsher 1997). This consumer is not alone, as evidenced by the fact that the over 60 million light trucks on the road today is more than triple the number in 1975 (Bradsher 1997). In response to the growing popularity, environmental groups such as the Sierra Club continue to speak out about the impacts of the SUV and many groups and individuals are pressuring Washington to raise the standards for the vehicles, ultimately leading to "greener" SUVs (<http://www.sierraclub.org/globalwarming/news/prsrel5%2D27%2D99.html>). The industry does not appear to be receptive to the proposed changes. Though it owes part of its success to the environmental movement, the industry blatantly disregards the concerns of the environmentalists by offering false images of environmentally-friendly vehicles.

Works Cited

- Akre, Brian S. "Ford Prepares to Launch Biggest SUV yet, Environmentalists Object." *The Daily Ardmoreite* Feb. 25, 1999. [Available www.ardmoreite.com/stories/022599/new_suv.shtml, accessed 2/1/00]
- Bradsher, Keith. "License to Pollute: A Special Report.; Light Trucks Increase Profits But Foul Air More Than Cars." *The New York Times* November 30 1997. [Available on Lexis-Nexis, 1/30/00.]
- Chevrolet Blazer. "A Little Security in an Insecure World" *Backpacker*. September 1999: 98.
- Chevrolet Tahoe. "Wherever you, your security blanket is packed." *Backpacker*. September 1999:100.
- Goeway, David. "'Careful, You May Run Out of Planet': SUVs and the Exploitation of the American Myth." *Signs of Life in the USA: Readings on Popular Culture for Writers*. Ed. Sonia Maasik and Jack Solomon. Boston, Bedford, 2000.
- "Thirty Senators Call on Clinton to Support Cleaner SUVs, Nearing Level to Sustain Presidential Action." [<http://www.sierraclub.org/globalwarming/news/prsrel5%2D27%2D99.html>, accessed 2/9/00].
- Toyota. [www.toyota.com, accessed 2/1/00]

Toyota 4Runner. "Air conditioning doesn't grow on trees." *Sports Illustrated*. January 17 2000:23.

Tread Lightly! [www.treadlightly.com, accessed 2/1/00]